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GENERAL GORDON'S LETTERS FROM THE CRIMEA, THE DANUBE AND ARMENIA

AUGUST 18, 1854, TO NOVEMBER 17, 1858

EDITED BY DEMETRIUS C. BOULGER

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General Gordon's Letters from the Crimea, the Danube and Armenia

This volume of letters was published in 1884, when General Gordon (1833–85) was engaged in the controversial defence of Khartoum that claimed his life the following year. The reputation of 'Chinese' Gordon, a complex figure, unpopular with the British government and military but adored by the people and press, was fed by works such as this. Covering his time in the Crimea as a young lieutenant, and later in the drawing up of the new frontiers between the Russian and Ottoman empires, these letters were published by his later biographer, Demetrius C. Boulger (1853–1928) as evidence of Gordon's strength of character and value as a military leader. One reviewer noted in them an 'indomitable cheerfulness of disposition, patient endurance, trustful fatalism, simple courage and faith, ... [and] single-hearted devotion to duty', words which reflected the popular view of Gordon as a symbol of British national pride and imperial honour.

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FROM THE CRIMEA, ETC.

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FROM

THE CRIMEA, THE DANUBE, AND ARMENIA.

AUGUST 18, 1854, TO NOVEMBER 17, 1858.

EDITED BY

DEMETRIUS C. BOULGER,

AUTHOR OF "THE HISTORY OF CHINA," ETC., ETC.

LONDON: CHAPMAN AND HALL,
LIMITED.
1884.

I DEDICATE,

WITHOUT HIS KNOWLEDGE,

THE FOLLOWING LETTERS

TO THE BROTHER OF THEIR AUTHOR,

SIR HENRY W. GORDON, K.C.B.,

IN WHOM

THE QUALITIES OF A GREAT CHARACTER

ARE EQUALLY CONSPICUOUS.

"PAR NOBILE FRATRUM."

INTRODUCTION.

THE following letters represent the earliest correspondence of General Gordon with members of his family after the commencement of his military career in the service of the Queen. In point of time, it is not probable that they will ever be superseded. When the first note was written from Pembroke Dock he was only a few months over twenty-one; when the last letter was sent from Constantinople he was still two months short of his twenty-sixth birthday. During that period of four years and a half he was constantly employed, with one interval, in connection with events of dramatic character, and the correspondence covers the whole of an epoch important in history and famous in our national annals.

There is a certain appropriateness as well as use in supplying fuller details of the first part of a public career which was destined to reveal so many picturesque and heroic incidents; and those details cannot be supplied in a clearer or more ample manner than in the young engineer officer's own words, though they were set down in all the haste and weariness of bodily exertion and mental fatigue in the trenches of the Crimea, amid the innumerable difficulties and annoyances of rapid travel in such a region as the Danubian principalities were and still are, and on the desert heights of the Armenian border lands. The reader can feel sure that he receives the impression as it took form under the pen of General Gordon; and although there is never a pretension to style, the language is always clear and direct, and no one can doubt that the writer reveals his true mind.

These letters are not without their use also. When General Gordon arrived in the Crimea, in the first days of the year 1855, the more striking events of the campaign had taken place. The thin red line had carried the heights of Alma, the immortal charge of the light brigade had

vindicated the reputation of at least English cavalry, and the attempted surprise of the position of Inkerman had resulted in the rout of the Russians. The winter troubles were in full progress. General Gordon himself was one of the arrivals from England destined to convert those troubles into the hopes of the spring, the waning expectations of the summer, and the long-anticipated triumph of the early autumn. The Historian has duly recorded and described the progress of events up to the period at which General Gordon's Crimean experiences began; but he has not yet reached that point at which the narrative of events to be found in the following pages really commences. They have, therefore, an intrinsic value apart from that given them by the name of their author. The letters from the Danube and Armenia, which will perhaps be considered the more interesting, are important as giving us from the best possible source the particulars of those two frontier commissions which by the energy of the English Government alone did impose limits for a time to the encroachments of Russia by compelling the Czar to relax

his hold on a cherished province in one continent, and on conquered fortresses in another.

But I think the general agreement of the reader will be with me when I say that their greatest importance is that they throw another light on the character of the man who, in the midst of innumerable tokens that an English Government fears its responsibilities, and shrinks with a craven spirit from discharging its part as the exponent of the tradition and mission of England, is affording by his courage and devotion to duty a much needed proof that Englishmen are not yet given over to the cruel and cowardly persuasion that they have but to enunciate some fine moral principle, or to demonstrate their logical consistency as political partisans, in order to escape the guilt of having produced unnecessary rebellion and useless slaughter by a course of action which has for four years put off the decision until the morrow which is always too late. In these pages may be seen the clearness of vision, the promptitude of resolve and action, the steadfast courage, the unswerving devotion to duty, the implicit belief in his own country, which, if remarkable when

combined in the person of an individual, are still the essential attributes of a people which as an insignificant minority is charged with and has accepted the task of spreading good government and maintaining peace throughout a great part of the Eastern world.

The man of action is revealed in these letters to his nearest and most intimate relations, recalling what he has said elsewhere, "inaction is terrible to me." There is little also of that religious fervour which has displayed itself in his more recent writings, although it is clear throughout that he is of a serious turn of mind, and not perhaps as other young men are. But he is evidently every inch a soldier, and one who, with utter disregard of his own life, never neglected a precaution, or showed himself indifferent to the advantages of science. If any explanation be asked of how and why General Gordon was able to lead a Chinese army to almost constant victory six years later, I believe the key is furnished in these letters, by his attention to detail and devotion to duty in the Crimea, on the Danube, and in Armenia. This side of the character of the man

who has held Khartoum during all these months of silence and isolation should be brought into prominence. His countrymen must well know that he at least will stand to his post to the last, and we believe that when he sends the first ray of light, and it will come from him, out of his prison-house, it will show that he has held his own, and more than held it, while everywhere else there have been confusion, retreat, and recrimination, with loss of character and the sowing of a plentiful crop of evils for the future in lands where the power of Englishmen will not enable them to stay save by the exhibition of the same attributes which planted their ancestors in them in the past.

It is well that at this moment we should be as strongly reminded as possible of that practical side of General Gordon's character which has made him the successful leader of armies and the vigorous administrator of vast provinces; and this record of his early career before he had done anything more famous than that which he is doing now, his duty to his country in face of the enemy, may be acceptable both to his admirers and to that large mass of Englishmen who, without

care for the intricacies of a political question, see an almost solitary * Englishman surrounded by a wide and ever-widening sea of rebellion and fanaticism, having little or no promise of effectual help, save what he may derive from his faith in his countrymen, and pronounce his abandonment, without fear of persons or of names, a shameful betrayal of a too-confiding officer, and an enduring stigma on the national honour.

"But one sad losel soils a name for aye."

DEMETRIUS C. BOULGER.

June 24, 1884.

* No disparagement is intended, because their names are not mentioned, of either Colonel Donald Stewart or the other Englishman, Mr. Power, now in Khartoum. All who know the former will feel sure that in him General Gordon has found an attached and energetic lieutenant.